

Whatcom Council of Governments

Public Participation Plan

Adopted
October 14, 2009

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Introduction

Transportation is an integral part of a wide range of regional activities and institutions. Transportation makes it possible for us to get where we want to go as well as to enjoy products and services from all over the world. Transportation is an essential element supporting our regional commerce, social support system, and quality of life. In the Whatcom County region, the transportation system includes an international airport, seaport, train service, transit services, sidewalks, bike lanes and paths, local and state roadways used by transit buses, private motor vehicles, freight haulers and other commercial vehicles.

The Whatcom Council of Governments (WCOG) is designated by the Governor as the region's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) planning agency under federal rules and as the region's Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) charged with coordinating transportation planning for the Whatcom County region under the Washington State Growth Management Act. WCOG is responsible for developing plans and programs that distribute federal transportation funds to transportation projects in Whatcom County. WCOG is controlled by three distinct Boards; a WCOG Full Council, an Executive Board and the Whatcom Transportation Policy Board (WTPB). The WTPB is the true decision making entity for all transportation related issues. All three are comprised of local and state elected officials.

The Surface Transportation Program (STP) provides flexible funding that may be used by States and localities for projects on any Federal-aid highway, including the National Highway System (NHS), bridge projects on any public road, transit capital projects, and intracity and intercity bus terminals and facilities. A portion of funds reserved for rural areas may be spent on rural minor collectors. Funds are allocated to the MPOs/RTPOs and county lead agencies for regional prioritization and selection.

Allocating transportation dollars for specific projects or programs is a substantial responsibility. WCOG staff must consider all federal transportation requirements. The WCOG MPO/ RTPO Transportation Technical Advisory Committee (TTAC) ultimately makes funding recommendations to the WTPB.

The advice and input of a wide range of stakeholders is critical to making successful transportation decisions. Stakeholders include the general public, business leaders and business groups, environmental and civic organizations, and advocacy groups that represent the needs of the underserved/under-represented (including low income, minority, elderly, and disabled populations). Each of these stakeholders has a different perspective, and a different set of transportation needs that WCOG considers during the transportation planning process. Public involvement is required by federal law to guide metropolitan transportation planning.

II. Purpose of the Public Participation Plan

Public participation is essential to the development of successful regional transportation solutions and to minimizing adverse project impacts.

WCOG crafted this Public Participation Plan with the intent of providing guidelines for establishing and maintaining optimum public involvement, including assessment tools for evaluating the effectiveness of the program. Exemplary public involvement begins early in the planning process and continues throughout each of the planning stages, helping to minimize project impacts while developing the best solutions to regional transportation issues.

This Public Participation Plan was developed in consultation with member organizations, federal, state, and local governments and a citizen advisory committee. WCOG has provided copies of the plan to all participating committee groups and to public libraries.

III. About the Whatcom Council of Governments

WCOG was formed in 1966, along with other Councils of Government in the State, under Washington Administrative Code. This action was preceded by federal enabling legislation leading to the establishment of Councils of Government in states with the intent of creating coordinating bodies to facilitate cross-jurisdictional issues.

WCOG was named in 1981, by the Washington State Governor, as the region's Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and in 1990 as the Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) under the Washington State Growth Management Act (GMA). WCOG is charged with meeting transportation planning requirements specified in the GMA and by the U.S Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) and Federal Transit Administration (FTA). Planning requirements include creating a Regional Transportation Plan, Transportation Improvement Program and the Public Participation Plan.

IV. Transportation Committees

In making transportation decisions, WCOG considers, among other tools, recommendations from the advisory committees named and described below. The membership of these committees provides input from interested persons, transit users, bicycle and pedestrian interests, business persons, persons representing special interest groups, and local technical experts including municipal engineers and planners. These advisory committees represent a fundamental means for the community to get involved in transportation project planning. The following section describes the standing advisory committees to the Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO), their composition, and their role in the RTPO decision making.

Whatcom Transportation Policy Board

The Whatcom Transportation Policy Board (WTPB) is comprised of elected representatives from local governments and other taxing authorities (Whatcom Transportation Authority, Port of Bellingham) Tribal Council Members and the Washington State Department of Transportation. The WTPB consolidated the functions and duties of the previously separate MPO and RTPO Policy Boards. Its primary purpose is to achieve intergovernmental coordination in developing policies and programs of mutual benefit to its member jurisdictions concerning transportation and to identify project funding priorities. It is responsible for developing policy guidance for the region through the Whatcom Transportation Plan.

Transportation Technical Advisory Committee

The Transportation Technical Advisory Committee (TTAC) is comprised of technically qualified representatives from Whatcom County, municipalities, tribes, Washington Department of Transportation (WSDOT), Port of Bellingham and the Whatcom Transportation Authority. TTAC meets monthly to discuss regional transportation planning and project funding issues, and make recommendations to the Whatcom Transportation Policy Board (WTPB).

Community Transportation Advisory Group

The Community Transportation Advisory Group (CTAG) is a citizen-based committee that meets monthly and advises the WTPB on the community's concerns to help reach a collaborative vision for Whatcom County's transportation system.

CTAG evolved from the Whatcom Transportation Summit held May 18, 2001, when over 150 community members and leaders gathered to lay the groundwork for a more coordinated, comprehensive, and community-based transportation policy. Summit participants agreed that more work was needed to translate community concerns into ongoing input for transportation planners and policy makers.

From that effort, a final report, *It Matters How We Get There*, was developed and the Community Transportation Advisory Group was established in 2003. CTAG membership makes up part of the WTA Citizen Advisory committee. Member input and initiative provides a mechanism for considering transportation improvement planning from varied regional needs and perspectives.

International Mobility and Trade Corridor Project

The International Mobility and Trade Corridor Project (IMTC) is a U.S. - Canadian coalition of business and government entities that identifies and promotes improvements to mobility and security for the four border crossings that connect Whatcom County, Washington State and the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. Together, these four crossings are called the Cascade Gateway.

The goals of the IMTC project are to:

- Facilitate a forum for ongoing communication between agencies that affect regional, cross-border transportation, safety, and security.
- Coordinate planning of the Cascade Gateway as a transportation and inspection system rather than as individual border crossings.
- Improve and distribute traffic data and information.
- Identify and pursue improvements to infrastructure, operations, and information technology.

Since 1997, IMTC has served as a model of regional coordination on border issues and has helped secure over \$38 million (USD) from U.S. and Canadian partners to pursue the goals listed above.

V. Transportation Plans and Programs

WCOG develops and updates several programs and plans associated with transportation alternatives and activities. In exercising its authority to guide the expenditure of federal and state transportation funds, it is critical for its public involvement process to provide complete information, timely public notice, and continuing involvement of the public in developing plans and programs. Below is a listing of the primary planning documents and programs developed by the WCOG with community input.

Whatcom Transportation Plan

The Whatcom Transportation Plan is a future vision of the community's transportation needs. The regional transportation plan is updated every five years to reflect changing public interest. The Regional Transportation Plan is fiscally constrained and includes transportation projects for upgrading the transportation infrastructure within the next twenty years.

Transportation Improvement Program

WCOG, as the designated Metropolitan Planning Organization (MPO) and Regional Transportation Planning Organization (RTPO) for Whatcom County, is required to prepare a Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) every year in conjunction with the WCOG members and the Washington State Department of Transportation. The TIP provides a comprehensive six-year listing of transportation improvements within the county that are on the regional transportation network as defined by the Whatcom Transportation Plan, and/or include projects with federal transportation funding. Projects listed in the first four years of the TIP must be fully funded.

Employment Access and Coordinated Human-Services Transportation Plan

In 2006 the WCOG RTPO convened a group of representatives of agencies and organizations serving special needs populations to formulate a plan for coordinated

transportation. This was a state-initiated activity as required by federal Human Services Act rules. The Employment Access and Coordinated Human-services Transportation (EACH) Plan sets forth action strategies to improve service and efficiency so that public investments in transportation work better for the whole population. WCOG, the Community Transportation Advisory Group (CTAG), and the Whatcom Transportation Authority (WTA) carry out the plan's recommendations.

Whatcom Smart Trips

Whatcom Smart Trips is an ongoing partnership between local government, employers, and schools to promote transportation by walking, bicycling, sharing rides, and riding the bus. Whatcom Smart Trips provides education, assistance and incentive programs to people who live or work in Whatcom County, successfully encouraging reduction in single-occupant motor-vehicle trips.

VI. Federal Requirements for the Public Participation Plan

Title 23: Highways

§450.316 Interested parties, participation, and consultation.

(a) The MPO shall develop and use a documented participation plan that defines a process for providing citizens, affected public agencies, representatives of public transportation employees, freight shippers, providers of freight transportation services, private providers of transportation, representatives of users of public transportation, representatives of users of pedestrian walkways and bicycle transportation facilities, representatives of the disabled, and other interested parties with reasonable opportunities to be involved in the metropolitan transportation planning process.

(1) The participation plan shall be developed by the MPO in consultation with all interested parties and shall, at a minimum, describe explicit procedures, strategies, and desired outcomes for:

(i) Providing adequate public notice of public participation activities and time for public review and comment at key decision points, including but not limited to a reasonable opportunity to comment on the proposed metropolitan transportation plan and the TIP;

(ii) Providing timely notice and reasonable access to information about transportation issues and processes;

(iii) Employing visualization techniques to describe metropolitan transportation plans and TIPs;

(iv) Making public information (technical information and meeting notices) available in electronically accessible formats and means, such as the World Wide Web;

- (v) Holding any public meetings at convenient and accessible locations and times;
- (vi) Demonstrating explicit consideration and response to public input received during the development of the metropolitan transportation plan and the TIP;
- (vii) Seeking out and considering the needs of those traditionally underserved by existing transportation systems, such as low-income and minority households, who may face challenges accessing employment and other services;
- (viii) Providing an additional opportunity for public comment, if the final metropolitan transportation plan or TIP differs significantly from the version that was made available for public comment by the MPO and raises new material issues which interested parties could not reasonably have foreseen from the public involvement efforts;
- (ix) Coordinating with the statewide transportation planning public involvement and consultation processes under subpart B of this part; and
- (x) Periodically reviewing the effectiveness of the procedures and strategies contained in the participation plan to ensure a full and open participation process.

(2) When significant written and oral comments are received on the draft metropolitan transportation plan and TIP (including the financial plans) as a result of the participation process in this section or the interagency consultation process required under the EPA transportation conformity regulations (40 CFR part 93), a summary, analysis, and report on the disposition of comments shall be made as part of the final metropolitan transportation plan and TIP.

(3) A minimum public comment period of 45 calendar days shall be provided before the initial or revised participation plan is adopted by the MPO. Copies of the approved participation plan shall be provided to the FHWA and the FTA for informational purposes and shall be posted on the World Wide Web, to the maximum extent practicable.

(b) In developing metropolitan transportation plans and TIPs, the MPO should consult with agencies and officials responsible for other planning activities within the MPA that are affected by transportation (including State and local planned growth, economic development, environmental protection, airport operations, or freight movements) or coordinate its planning process (to the maximum extent practicable) with such planning activities. In addition, metropolitan transportation plans and TIPs shall be developed with due consideration of other related planning activities within the metropolitan area, and the process shall provide for the design and delivery of transportation services within the area that are provided by:

- (1) Recipients of assistance under title 49 U.S.C. Chapter 53;

(2) Governmental agencies and non-profit organizations (including representatives of the agencies and organizations) that receive Federal assistance from a source other than the U.S. Department of Transportation to provide non-emergency transportation services; and

(3) Recipients of assistance under 23 U.S.C. 204.

(c) When the MPA includes Indian Tribal lands, the MPO shall appropriately involve the Indian Tribal government(s) in the development of the metropolitan transportation plan and the TIP.

(d) When the MPA includes Federal public lands, the MPO shall appropriately involve the Federal land management agencies in the development of the metropolitan transportation plan and the TIP.

(e) MPOs shall, to the extent practicable, develop a documented process(es) that outlines roles, responsibilities, and key decision points for consulting with other governments and agencies, as defined in paragraphs (b), (c), and (d) of this section, which may be included in the agreement(s) developed under §450.314.

In response to these requirements, WCOG has established the following public participation strategies to undertake as part of every planning activity it oversees.

VII. Public Participation Strategies

Objective 1: Inform the Public

Policy: It is the policy of WCOG to inform the public, to the maximum extent possible with available resources, of opportunities to participate in the transportation decision making process.

Techniques:

E-mail meeting agendas to WCOG members, committee members, and parties that express interest.

Post meeting agendas and summaries on the WCOG website.

Use news media to inform the public by providing process and product information to the local newspapers, as appropriate.

Objective 2: Educate the Public

Policy: It is WCOG's policy to educate residents regarding their role in the transportation planning process.

Techniques:

Encourage people to visit Transportation Town (www.TransportationTown.com). This is an interactive transportation educational tool specifically designed to help inform Whatcom County residents about transportation options, regional plans and planning agencies, and how to get more involved in the region's transportation future.

Provide a summary of all the plans that Whatcom County, Whatcom County cities, and WCOG are responsible for creating and updating. Create a simplified timeline showing when each plan is open to receive public comment. Post this information on the WCOG website.

Create a slideshow using maps, illustrations and photos to explain what the region's transportation system currently looks like and how it is designed to work. Use maps, illustrations and photos of other communities that have implemented the improvements being proposed by Whatcom County and the cities within the county and regional plans so that community members can more easily visualize what local plans are proposing be implemented here. Include cost estimates for improvement projects so that citizens understand the cost of what is being proposed. Include maps, illustrations and photos that show alternatives to the actions being proposed in the plans, so that community members understand that there are different possibilities for improving the overall system.

Provide an online survey that solicits feedback from people who have viewed the slideshow.

Set up educational displays at public locations such as community centers, including those in traditionally underserved areas.

Objective 3: Involve the Public

Policy: It is the policy of WCOG to involve the public early and often in the transportation planning process.

Techniques:

Actively promote public participation attendance at the Transportation Technical Advisory Committee, Community Transportation Advisory Group, and Whatcom Transportation Policy Board meetings.

Actively promote WCOG websites, including features which allow direct contact with staff for questions or comments.

Use public opinion surveys to give the community an opportunity to provide input on the types of projects that needs funding.

Solicit feedback on draft documents via the internet, through standing committees, and through public availability (libraries, etc.)

Objective 4: Reach Out to Communities

Policy: WCOG will reach out to geographic, organizational, and demographic communities within the WCOG region enabling the broadest and most representative participation possible in developing transportation plans and services.

Techniques:

Use census data, surveys and GIS tools among other resources to identify traditionally underserved communities.

Use tools such as informational flyers and surveys when appropriate to distribute information about the regional transportation plan to areas serving traditionally under-represented communities (i.e. senior centers, medical centers and human services providers).

Distribute copies of planning documents to public libraries in Whatcom County. Actively maintain a list of potentially interested groups and individuals and alert them of opportunities for participation/input.

Coordinate with local governments regarding community contacts.

The current agenda shall include the time, date, and location of the meeting, and a notice that WCOG is required to respond to all requests and provide special accommodations for persons with disabilities when the request is received at least ten days prior to a WCOG meeting. WCOG will meet requests for special accommodations received less than ten days before a WCOG meeting when practical.

Objective 5: Improve Public Involvement

Policy: It is the policy of WCOG to continually identify and implement ways to improve its public involvement processes.

Techniques:

Research and utilize opportunities to use media and venues that will reach greater numbers and more diverse populations.

Conduct assessments of the effectiveness of public involvement techniques and discuss assessment results with transportation staff.

Continue WCOG regional coordination of public involvement activities, particularly when projects may directly involve residents.

VIII. Procedures

WCOG will use standardized procedures to ensure public access to regional planning information and activities. Not all procedures may be appropriate for each instance. However, the following procedures will establish a minimum guideline, giving consideration to all segments of society.

While not all activities involving WCOG will require using these procedures, they should be applied liberally, rather than conservatively. Whenever there is any doubt as to the policy's applicability, it should be followed.

Meetings

In the past, WCOG has established special committees to ensure coordination of the regional transportation planning and programming process. Existing regular standing committees include the Whatcom Transportation Policy Board (WTPB), Transportation Technical Advisory Committee (TTAC), and Community Transportation Advisory Group (CTAG). The meetings of these committees are always open to the public. WTPB meets at a minimum four times a year. TTAC and CTAG committees are scheduled to meet monthly for discussion and development of the regional transportation planning and programming of transportation projects. They make recommendations to the WTPB. Recognizing the need to involve the public when decisions are made by WTPB, WCOG will carry out the following procedures:

(1) Regularly Scheduled WCOG Meetings -

- a. WCOG shall provide notification to the Bellingham Herald of all public meetings at least seven days in advance and at least fourteen days in advance for public hearings. Notification shall consist of, at a minimum, sending a copy of the agenda including time, date, and location of the meeting. The media notification shall include a request that meetings be added to community calendars. WCOG will maintain a website that includes current meeting schedules, approved minutes, meeting agendas, and special meeting notices.
- b. The current agenda shall include the time, date, and location of the meeting, and a notice that WCOG is required to respond to all requests and provide special accommodations for persons with disabilities when the request is received at least ten days prior to a WCOG meeting. WCOG will meet requests for special accommodations received less than ten days before a WCOG meeting when practical.
- c. A 15-minute opportunity for public comment will be provided as an agenda item at all regular WCOG meetings to provide an opportunity for public comment if members of the public are present.
- d. The WCOG Chairperson will, at the outset of the public comment period, establish the guidelines by which the public comment will be conducted (ie subject, comment time limits, etc.)
- e. All WCOG meetings will be conducted in facilities readily accessible to persons with disabilities, as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act, as amended, and Washington State regulations.

(2) Public Hearings

- a. WCOG shall hold public hearings where verbatim transcripts of the public comment are required due to a WCOG action, and at the discretion of the WCOG Chair.
- b. WCOG shall publish legal notices in the Bellingham Herald and a notice on its website of all public hearings at least fourteen days in advance of each hearing. Notices shall consist of, at a minimum, time, date, action being taken, location of the meeting and a notice that WCOG is required to respond to all requests and provide special accommodations for persons with disabilities when the request is received up to ten days prior to a WCOG meeting. Accommodations will be provided when practical. The media notification shall include a request that meetings be added to community calendars.
- c. A statement will be placed on each agenda that written comments will be accepted instead of oral testimony. Reasonable submission deadlines may be established so that comments may be forwarded to appropriate policy board members.
- d. The WCOG Chairperson will establish the guidelines by which the public hearing will be conducted (ie subject, comment time limits, etc.) at the outset of the hearing.
- e. All WCOG hearings will be conducted in facilities readily accessible to persons with disabilities, as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act and Washington State regulations.

(3) Workshops and Special Meetings - Occasionally special circumstances arise and workshops and/or special WCOG meetings may be held. It is WCOG's intention to provide guidance by which the notification of the workshops and special meeting will be conducted to maximize public participation in the events.

- a. WCOG workshops and special meetings (except declared emergencies) shall follow the same notification and participation procedures identified in (1)(a) through (1)(e) above. Public notice for emergency meetings will be attempted by sending a notice to the Bellingham Herald and via e-mail lists.
- b. Efforts must be made to notify known interested parties of hearings, workshops, and meetings relevant to their interests.
- c. In the event that a special meeting of the WCOG must be conducted, 24 hours notice will be supplied to all media. Efforts will be made to contact affected parties and any other interested parties 24 hours before the special meeting.
- d. Mailing lists of interested persons should be developed and maintained from sign-up lists at hearings, communications, and workshops dealing with related issues.
- e. Every attempt will be made to secure accommodations for, and meet the needs of, special needs and disabled persons when requested.

Plan Development

(1) During any given year WCOG undertakes different planning activities in support of the regional transportation plan. WCOG recognizes that public input is a critical element of a successful planning effort. The extent of public participation may vary between different planning activities.

(2) WCOG will include a public participation element in every planning activity work plan. The public participation element will identify the extent and type of public participation programs that will be implemented in each activity.

Public Information

(1) WCOG shall maintain an up-to-date mailing list of all local and regional media.

(2) WCOG will establish and maintain a mailing list of interested individuals and organizations.

- a. The mailing list will include under-represented groups and other interested citizens.
- b. WCOG will maintain an agency mailing list that includes: transit, traffic, rideshare groups, safety and enforcement agencies, port authorities, appropriate private transportation providers, city and local officials and any other agency interested in the transportation planning process.

(3) WCOG transportation planning documents will be available to the public for reference at WCOG. Adopted documents will be submitted to local libraries within the region to allow public access to the information.

(4) Draft documents will be made available to the public for a reasonable period before adoption, but no less than fourteen (14) days.

Public Input

(1) A summary, analysis and report of written and oral comments received from the public regarding draft transportation plans or Transportation Improvement Programs (TIP) will be included as part of final transportation plan or TIP documents.

Public Review of the Public Participation Plan

(1) WCOG will provide a minimum public comment period of 45 days before the public participation plan is initially adopted or revised.

(2) WCOG will establish an ongoing review of the public involvement process.